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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a project undertaken by the Free Kindergarten Association-Multicultural Resource Centre in Victoria, Australia, to develop policies, models, and strategies for establishing and maintaining bilingual programs in preschool or child care centers, either as full bilingual programs or as bilingual perspectives in other programs. After describing existing language programs in primary schools and preschools, the paper reports on a case study of bilingual instruction at three child care centers. Based on videotape observations as well as child and staff interviews, the report describes the methods and effectiveness of the bilingual programs. It recommends that all early childhood education programs in Australia acquire the capacities needed to introduce second language or bilingual programs. (Contains 22 references.) (MDM)

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Bilingual Models for Early Childhood Education
Birth to Five Years

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Bilingual Models for Early Childhood Education
Birth to Five Years

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ABSTRACT

Description of a national research project under the Australian Second Language Learning Program. This is the only Australian national project for second language research that is specifically concerned with children below the age of school entry. Purposes are to develop policies, guidelines and models for child care and preschool programs that will: foster the development of linguistic skills in young children with a first language other than English; do this in ways that ensure both the maintenance and development of the first language AND the learning of English; and demonstrate practices that are appropriate for young children in all areas of their development. Some existing bilingual programs of child care are described, with different approaches to planning for bilingual education. There is a discussion of some strengths and difficulties. Recommendations are made to assist others to conduct bilingual programs for children in the age range, either as full bilingual programs or as bilingual aspects of other programs. The paper is supported by a short audio-visual presentation.

Background to Research

This research project was conducted by the Free Kindergarten Association - Multicultural Resource Centre (FKA MRC) Melbourne, Australia. It was funded by the Australian Government (Department of Education, Employment and Training) under the Australian Second Language Learning Program.

The aim was to develop policies, models and strategies that would assist people to establish and maintain bilingual models in preschool or child care centres, either as full bilingual programs or as bilingual perspectives in other programs. The approach adopted was to describe and evaluate aspects of the bilingual programs in selected child care and preschool centres and to follow the transition of children from the programs into primary (elementary) school.

The project arose from the belief of the FKA MRC that services for children below school age play a vital role in ensuring the continuation and development of the first language and the learning of English as a second language. The Multicultural Resource Centre is a unit of the Free Kindergarten Association of Victoria Inc. which is a non-government association concerned with early childhood care and education in the state of Victoria, Australia. Victoria and South Australia are the two out of seven States with the earliest and most extensive involvement in bilingual programs for young children. One must keep in mind, when discussing Australian early childhood programs, that they may show wide variation from State to State.

The Multicultural Resource Centre's activities include:

Development of multicultural materials;

Resourcing and advising of early childhood centres;

Bilingual Workers Program & Supplementary Workers Program;

Early childhood consultancy;

Professional development training;

Library services;

Research.

As part of the children's services program of the Australian Government's Department of Health, Housing and Community Services (DHHCS), a number of ethnic sponsored child care centres have been funded by the Australian Government in the last twenty years. These are bilingual/bicultural centres, sponsored by ethnic groups who feel that existing centres do not meet their needs. Although these centres operate (like all Government-funded centres) to include any child who requires care, the majority of the children attending come from the particular ethnic background of the program. At the present time, ethnic sponsored child care centres in the State of Victoria cover the following language groups: Arabic, Greek, Vietnamese, Chinese, Spanish, Turkish, Yugoslav languages, and Italian.

The FKA MRC has a responsibility to resource and advise the bilingual child care centres. In working with the centres on the development of their programs it became evident that there is a need for increased knowledge, by staff, of developmentally appropriate practice, and a need to set out policies

in these centres for developing the linguistic skills of the children, both in the mother tongue and in English as a second language.

A few scarce funds had been used to establish some bilingual child care centres but no funds previously had been available to evaluate the effect of these programs, or to assist early childhood organizations to develop policies and models that could provide guidelines for the establishment and development of such programs. The bulk of public funds has gone to supporting Languages Other Than English (LOTE) programs in schools, and bilingual development in the years prior to school entry has been little appreciated.

Australia as a Multicultural and Multilingual Society

Bilingual early childhood programs need to be viewed within the framework of Australia's multicultural society. Australia's post-World War II immigration policies have been by no means flawless but they are remarkable in three dimensions - size, cultural diversity and citizenship (Castles et al 1990 ; Collins 1991). The size of the immigration program has been huge relative to the size of the population. In 1947, Australia had a population of approximately seven and a half million, ninety percent of whom were born in Australia and well over ninety percent of whom spoke English as their mother tongue. The population is now over sixteen million and immigration has been a major factor in this growth

Australia is one of the most cosmopolitan societies in the world yet the cultural diversity of Australian society has been, to a large extent, unintentional (Collins, 1991). The immigration program began with the intention of cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Changing conditions of availability of migrants, and the increasing numbers of refugees, led to a remarkable broadening of Australia's immigration practice. There are now over one hundred ethnic groups, speaking approximately one hundred and fifty languages of immigrant origin, as well as the surviving Australian Aboriginal languages. One in four persons in Australian society now has a mother tongue other than English (Castles et al 1990; Clyne 1991). (Refer Table 1.)

A feature of the Australian recruitment of immigrants for the labour market was the encouragement of citizenship rather than the assigning of a guest worker status. This was allied to a gradual, unplanned shift in philosophy from assimilation to integration, then to the current multicultural policy of the Australian Government.

Language Programs in Schools

Australia's view of the diversity of language backgrounds in its multicultural society is undergoing a change. Originally, the speaking of languages other than English by immigrants was seen as a problem to be solved by a swift change to learning English and speaking only English. Later, the right to

maintain one's mother tongue was argued on humanitarian grounds and limited provision made to assist this. Only now is Australia's pool of native speakers of languages other than English, coming to be regarded as a valuable national resource (Lo Bianco, 1987,1992).

The teaching of 'Community Languages' or 'Languages Other Than English' (LOTE), beginning in the primary school, is now argued not only in terms of the rights of immigrants to maintain their language and culture but also in terms of the need for all Australian children to learn a second language. LOTE programs aim to maintain and develop the home language of non-English speaking background children and, together with English language programs, to give all children the opportunity to acquire some level of proficiency in a second language.

A number of primary schools in Australia have true bilingual programs in which instruction is in English and another community language, in at least some of the school curriculum areas. Although these programs were usually set up in response to requests from ethnic communities, they are open to all children in the school community whatever their language background, including English language background children. These programs are often transitional, covering just the first three years of school, after which the children move into language maintenance programs.

One of the difficulties of setting up and maintaining bilingual programs in Australian primary schools is the cultural diversity reflected in many classrooms. It is possible for a class of thirty children to contain twenty two or

more different language backgrounds. Within the child care system, below school age, it is easier to maintain bilingual programs, particularly if an ethnic community supports and develops the program. Even if the members of the ethnic community are scattered across the city, since the children below school age are taken to child care by adults, a bilingual child care centre can serve families coming from a wider geographical area. Thus the program does not lose its clientele as immigrant families become more prosperous and move into different suburbs.

In spite of the government policy that all Australian children will have the chance to learn a second language, many schools do not yet offer classes in languages other than English. In any case the main emphasis is on full competence for all children in the English language. English as a second language (ESL) has been a specialist stream in the primary school curriculum (and at all other levels including adult) to give persons of non-English speaking background (NESB) the opportunity to acquire competency in English. The current educational policy is now moving away from specialist ESL programs towards mainstreaming NESB children as soon as possible. This is argued to have potential advantages but the danger is that mainstreaming in practice can become just a method of cutting out ethnospecific programs without putting the necessary multicultural knowledge and skills into mainstream services. The move to mainstreaming of NESB children in schools makes it all the more important not to waste, nor leave to chance, bilingual language development in the years prior to school entry.

Language Development Prior to School Entry

The FKA MRC Bilingual Models research is based on the premise that if we value, seriously, the language resources of Australian society, we cannot afford to ignore and waste the potential of the years before school entry (Clarke, 1982). Furthermore, a bilingual program in the years before school entry can be expected to facilitate the transition of children into language programs of all kinds in primary school.

In Australia, school entry is at approximately five years of age. Child care is not part of the school system and, in some states, preschools and kindergartens are also not part of the formal school system. Information does not always flow across systems. We can have the situation where a child in the beginners' class at school, who speaks a language other than English at home (and perhaps one or even two other languages) may be referred to by school teachers as having 'no language' because she does not yet speak English in the school classroom. The child may already be displaying a functional level of English in the school playground, but not yet in the formal classroom situation which is still be too strange an environment for her to feel confident in speaking English. Even the most recent Australian Language Levels Guidelines (McKay & Scarino 1991), do not show sufficient appreciation of the amount of first and second second language acquisition that may have taken place in preschool or child care programs before children enter the school system.

The FKA MRC develops materials, and conducts seminars, to help educators bridge the information gap across systems from preschool to primary school. Leading on from the present research project, it is planned to develop language profiles in the years prior to school, showing achievements in all languages, which can be passed on with the child to help with a smoother transition to school.

The failure to recognize that many children are developing their bilingual skills from a very early age, has also meant that a considerable number of NESB children who attend mainstream preschool or child care programs have had to develop English in isolation from the maintenance of their first language. The value of maintaining the first language while learning English as a second language has not been fully recognized. In the early years, so crucial to language development, this maintenance of mother tongue is essential to provide a firm foundation for the learning of the second language. Research suggests that learning another language will have a positive long-term impact on the learning of English. Children do not learn English better if they forget or neglect their home language. Evidence shows that subtracting one language does not improve the other, yet many teachers and parents still cling to this old belief. As Lo Bianco (1992:7) has said

> It seems that it is only with languages that schools expect children to unlearn valuable knowledge and skills they have gained at home; a curious role for instituions of learning.

Policies

A set of policies, which directed attention to certain aspects of bilingual programs was identified. It must be noted that there are, in fact, very few written policy statements at the government level directly related to this area. Many of the existing polices, strategies and funding arrangements reflect the attitude that education begins at school entry. As has been stated, a basic assumption behind the present project, and indeed, behind all the work of the FKA MRC is that early childhood institutions such as kindergartens, preschools and child care centres, catering for children below the age of school entry, must nevertheless be recognized as institutions of society in which significant early education does or should take place.

Policies

- Educational institutions are responsible for preparing young people to participate effectively in the life of the multicultural society.

- The whole environment - adults, children, materials, language and content should reflect a multicultural perspective.

- All Australian children should learn about Aboriginal culture and languages.

- Bilingual early childhood education should take place within a total program of care and education; it should be based on developmentally appropriate aims and procedures for children below school age.

• All Australian children, whatever their family language background, should develop competence in English.

• Children of non-English speaking backgrounds should be able to maintain and develop their first or home languages.

• All Australian children, whatever their language background, should have the opportunity to learn a second language.

• Professional development of teachers is essential to meet the goals of the Australian Literacy and Language Policy.

Research Strategies

The research approach in this study is descriptive: a naturalistic approach close to a case study method, as non-intrusive as possible. This descriptive approach was deemed appropriate in view of the fact that there has been very little systematic observation and discussion of what actually takes place in bilingual programs for children below school age.

It is not always appreciated that child care or preschool environments are usually very different from the more formal structure still to be found in many school classrooms. Failure to appreciate this difference means failure to appreciate the rich nature of communicative interactions within more child-

centred settings, and therefore failure to appreciate why a preschool or child care program can be a perfect setting for the acquisition of English as a second language. Observation of the hour-to-hour and day-to- day activities and interactions in bilingual child care settings were sought to give good descriptions as a data base.

It was therefore decided to study selected bilingual models of early childhood programs, in different environments and with different language policies. Recognizing that research findings are always heavily dependent on the choice of research methods, many different methods of data collection were used including time-sampling observations, video recording, interviews and document searches. In keeping with the descriptive and naturalistic approach, it was decided to focus on natural examples of learner language and person to person communication within the selected programs, rather than on language elicited by researchers.

Centres

Initially, three existing child care centres were selected for detailed study. Each centre was visited at least seven times. Coordinators from these three centres were members of the Steering Committee for the project. During the course of the project, as a result of discussion with staff in other bilingual programs and members of the steering committee, it was felt desirable to add information from some other programs which represented different types of models. Four additional child care centres were visited and are described within the framework models. A sessional preschool (two and a half hours a day) with a multilingual program was also included because some children

from one of the selected child care centres were also attending the preschool, and also because the multilingual nature of the program represented another model characterized by the large number of bilingual staff workers from different language backgrounds.

Discussion also took place with staff from seven other centres during in-service seminars related to the project, and with staff from five other bilingual centres through visits or telephone conversations. The contributions of staff members from these additional centres provided valuable additional perspectives on the various models.

Notwithstanding the variety of models involved, it is not claimed that the study covered all bilingual models of early childhood programs. All of the centres were in Victoria or South Australia. Information was difficult to obtain in some other States where bilingual early childhood programs may be few or may not exist.

Video Recordings

The main method of data collection was through video recordings with radio microphones. The oldest group of children in each of the three main child care centres was videotaped on three or four occasions, resulting in approximately 30 hours in all of videotape. The videotapes covered as many different times of day and aspects of the program as possible: indoor and outdoor, structured and unstructured activities, planned sessions and spontaneous play.

From this method was obtained an overall view of the working of each group within its own physical and social context. Within this broader perspective researches could then focus in on details, as deemed appropriate, the details being located accurately within the total context.

The videotapes enabled researchers to go back over data for re-checking by different observers. This reliability check by more than one researcher, including native speakers of each language, was deemed necessary for accurate analysis of language use, language interactions and the social context of language.

The videos were transcribed by competent native speakers of each community language and the community language material was translated into English. The transcripts were later used to analyse levels of language use in both first and second languages, adult-child and child-child communicative interactions, the social contexts of language, and the kind of events that appeared to impede children's language interactions and those that appeared to foster language.

Observations

Data was also gathered through observations without filming at each of the three main child care centres and at four additional centres. Although there were observations of all groups of children in each centre, the main focus was on the 4-5 year old children, and particularly those who would be going on to school at the start of the next year.

Attention was given not only to child-child and child-adult interactions, but also to materials and equipment, particularly those related to language and early literacy development such as books for children; pictures, posters and other visual images; drawing, painting and writing materials; and properties to encourage symbolic play.

Selected Children

Within the groups of older children, three children at each of the three main child care centres were selected for more detailed attention. The primary purpose was to ensure that sufficient language data would be collected on at least two or three children from each centre to enable researchers to make judgments about their first and second language development.

The FKA MRC Language Assessment Checklist (Clarke, 1991) was used as the chief instrument for assessing language development, together with various other instruments including those looking at the social contexts of use of each language.

Educators

The term educator was used to cover each teacher or care-giver in a program. Talks were held with educators at the commencement, during, and at the completion of the data gathering. These included individual meetings with centre coordinators, perusal of documentations such as existing policy documents, reports, reviews, handbooks, individual talks with staff members, attendance at some staff meetings or planning sessions and regular contact at the centres.

Items discussed included history, management and funding of the centre; philosophy, rules and procedures; enrolments; staff qualifications, experience and deployment; program planning and timetabling; methods of keeping records of children's progress; contact with families; family cultural and language backgrounds; areas of strengths and difficulties; and staff professional development plans and needs. In addition, staff members in charge of the older children contributed their time and knowledge generously in such actions as drawing our attention to language achievements of children between visits and in completing MRC Language Assessment Checklists for selected children in their first and second languages.

At the completion of the data gathering, two in-service sessions were held for educators involved in the project and for any others working or or interested in working in bilingual early childhood programs. The demand for places in these sessions was heavy and more have been planned.

Parents

Parent input was valued but was limited to two group meetings and casual on-the-run contact. Knowing that child care parents have heavy demands on their time, it was decided to seek information from parents through staff. More direct parent contact would have been valuable.

Transition to school

Contact was made with all schools receiving any of the nine selected children from the study, and visits were paid to three schools - one for each of the three main mother tongue language groups in the study. These contacts

were made at the beginning of second term allowing time for children to settle into school and time for teachers to assess their language and early literacy development.

Verbal reports of the children's progress were obtained. Discussion focused on each child's general adjustment to school, general progress in school work, progress in English, value placed by school on mother tongue maintenance, information about community language or LOTE programs through the primary school and children's participation in any such programs.

Some Findings and Discussion

Findings, discussion and recommendations were wide-ranging in this explorative descriptive research study. In this paper I have chosen to refer briefly to four intertwined areas: models of bilingual programs; first and second language development within a developmentally appropriate program; social development and multiple perspectives taking; and the professional development of early childhood educators for bilingual programs.

Bilingual Program Models

In this study we observed many different bilingual program models: highly structured and very loosely structured; mixed age grouping and separated age grouping; simultaneous exposure to two (or more) languages and

separated exposure. The various models are displayed in Table 2. This table is not meant to represent an exhaustive list of possible models or existing models for bilingual early childhood programs. Rather, it presents a way of categorizing the programs encountered in this study. Each of the programs could be placed within one of these categories. More than one bilingual program, each with minor differences, may have been used in constructing one category.

The bilingual language policy used by the majority of centres for their adult language policy was the policy generally supported by research as the preferred option, i.e. one adult, one language. There was very little code switching, in the main. In many centres both languages appeared to have equal status and where there appeared to be a value weighting, it was in favour of the ethnic language. The major exceptions were in the multilingual preschool program where English was the language common to all, and the one ethnic child care program where the children were third generation Australian and English was often the dominant language in the home. Otherwise, children generally generally replied in the language first used in a conversation.

In the third generation centre, where parents were often or usually speaking English in the home, there was a policy of one adult - both languages in the centre. There were characteristic difficulties of which staff were aware: children grew slightly in understanding of the ethnic language but did not speak it spontaneously with either adults or peers.

There is a need to look more closely at the development of third language children in bilingual child care programs. Third language children are children who come into a bilingual program speaking a mother tongue other than the two main languages in the bilingual program. Almost universally, this was considered 'no problem' by the educators caring for them but this judgment was made in terms of a child's development in understanding of the two languages in the program and not in terms of the child's maintenance and development of it's home language.

In some centres, English was the first language used with these children then, perhaps after several weeks, the second language of the centre was added. At other centres, the newcomers might be introduced to the two languages of the centre from the beginning. In all cases, staff said that most children 'picked up' enough language to function adequately and comfortably by four to six weeks. There was a great warmth of physical contact, facial expression and tone of voice in all centres which, no doubt, helped these children settle into the centres. However, their settling-in was not the issue, nor their acquisition of English and the ethnic language of the centre. It was mother tongue maintenance and development.

Researchers had reservations about the progress of some third language children, particularly those in the toddlers' group, and particularly those in the program where the language model was one adult - two languages. Detailed study was not possible. However, no educators appeared to be giving serious attention to the development of the mother tongue. Some of

these children were babies and toddlers, and some were in such long day care that their amount of exposure to their mother tongue could have been less than their amount of exposure to the languages in the bilingual program. We need to know more about the conditions under which mother tongue development can be expected to proceed normally or be interrupted in third language children in bilingual child care: conditions such as age of child and stage of mother tongue language development on entry to the program, and hours of attendance in relationship to hours of exposure to mother tongue.

All of the programs directly observed could be said to fall into the category of 'developmentally appropriate' according to the N.A.E.Y.C. guidelines (Bredekamp, 1987) and the Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines (Office of Preschool and Child Care, Victoria, 1991) although some programs would rate much higher than others within that category. It appeared to be the ability of some educators to make critical two-way developmental matches between child and environment, that made the difference in the quality of language interactions in the bilingual programs, as in all programs of early childhood education.

Some examples of matches between a child and the objects, events and challenges in the program environment, can be observed in the accompanying video. These video examples demonstrate some of the skill of the early childhood educator, Judy, in both planned and spontaneous interactions.

Judy is an educator who knows when and how to plan and set up an environment that will stimulate language amongst peers and then step back and let it happen; when and how to intervene to instruct or direct attention, and when and how to participate as an equal and encourage language by following a child's interests and interacting in a conversational way without taking over the activity; Videotapes of interactions of this kind proved to be one of the most powerful resources for staff development.

There is a marked difference in the quality, quantity and variety of child-adult interactions encouraged by an educator with Judy's knowledge and skill, and those of others with less expertise. For example, one adult in the study, in a count of language utterances during two periods of free indoor play activities (approximately three hours) produced two hundred and four directive utterances out of a total of two hundred and sixteen utterances. This language interaction style has been pin-pointed by Nelson (1973) as probably not helpful for language acquisition in early childhood.

Notwithstanding individual differences in the quality of language interactions, this study supports the claim that bilingual developmentally appropriate early childhood programs can provide excellent environments for the maintenance and development of the mother tongue and the development of ESL. Assessment of the development of mother tongue language and ESL of children in the bilingual programs showed that many of the children developed both their mother tongue and their ESL to an age appropriate level.

The claim has been made (Wong-Fillmore, 1991) that the early childhood education of NESB children should be entirely in their mother tongue, for optimal language, social and cognitive development. The literature does suggest that the status and value of the mother tongue in the early childhood bilingual program is an importance factor. The perceived dominance and desirability of a majority language to which a young child is being exposed, can lead to a loss of the mother tongue. This posits, of course, danger in early ESL immersion programs but bilingual programs are not immersion programs.

Wong- Fillmore (1991) argues that no early childhood bilingual programs can work, on the basis of viewing all the bilingual programs she observed as being ESL immersion programs. However, in the bilingual child care programs in the FKA MRC study, where the programs were managed by ethnic communities, the status of the mother tongue was high and its maintenance was actively promoted by the educators (both mother tongue models and English language models) which the committee of management from the ethnic community selected to be involved in the program.

Educators must be committed to a belief that well-developed mother tongue language is essential for success in ESL and literacy development. They must also understand that it is important to the development of a positive self identity and to the maintenance of communication with parents. As has been argued (Wong- Fillmore 1991:32) it is bad social policy to support early education programs that jeopardise family communication patterns, and cohesiveness.

The functional communicative approach to second language acquisition (whether ESL or LOTE) is the best bilingual approach in early childhood, which fits in with a child-centred developmental program in which children want to learn to communicate because it is immediately functional. They are motivated to talk so as to make things happen; to act on their world; to join in play; to argue; and to get what they want. Bruner (1990) has shown how important this functional communicative aspect of language is for early development of a child's mother tongue. Our observations support claims that it is also extremely powerful as a motivational force for second language acquisition in a bilingual setting.

Notwithstanding the importance of play, particularly symbolic sociodramatic play, for the child-child communicative interactions that encourage language development (Schrader, 1990; Bateson 1980), very little sociodramatic play was observed in the bilingual programs visited. This would be a useful area for exploration in professional development workshops.

Social Development

We need to reaffirm the traditional early childhood education emphasis on social development. Developmental psychologists are now increasingly looking at children in social interactions (rather than in individual situations) to understand cognitive development, and the inextricable links between social development, cognitive development and language development (Bruner 1986, 1990; Bruner & Haste, 1987). Parents of children in the bilingual programs overwhelmingly pin-pointed aspects of social

development as the main value they expected their children to gain from the program. It was summed up in phrases such as 'Learning to get on with lots of different people'.

While educators in centres agreed with parents about the importance of social development, there was also a tendency for many educators (like many parents) to speak as if social development 'just happens' when young children are put together in groups and 'left to work things out for themselves'. This is not so. In these circumstances young children are likely to be learning that 'might is right' (Milne, 1984).

In a multicultural society in particular, it is of crucial importance that children journey towards higher stages of social development than that of 'might is right'. We must educate citizens who will have a high level of commitment to and understanding of social justice. They must be extremely skilled in cooperation, negotiation, conflict resolution, and - the ability that underlies all these - the ability to take multiple perspectives (Milne, 1991). Research suggests that bringing up children bilingually will contribute to their cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility includes the ability to take multiple perspectives. Children reared bilingually are learning that there is more than one way to categorize something, more than one way to view the world. (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981)

Australia is in a process of exploring what its multicultural identity means. We have officially moved from an policy of integration to one of diverse cultures existing side by side with equal basic rights. Some Australians see the view of co-existing separate cultures as a stage which we need to reach beyond, to one of diversity within unity which recognizes that every individual has multiple loyalties (Jayasuriya, 1987). Castles et al (1990;13) argue that, although multiculturalism is progressive in so far as it presents a non-ethnocentric image of a nation, it is regressive in so far as it reaffirms national identity rather than transcending the national for a vision human identity. the question of an Australian identity is still open to lively debate. However, it is certain that the reality of a multicultural society certainly requires a far more complex view of the development of individual identity and self-concept than many of us have been in the habit of envisaging as early childhood educators. The more complex view of identity development points to the need to reemphasize social development which was once a traditional strength in the field of early childhood education.

Direction

Early childhood education in Australian in the future needs to be bilingual education. Australia is a country where difference and diversity are the reality. When we are setting up programs of developmentally appropriate care and education for children from birth to five years, not to take multiculturalism and bilingualism seriously is to waste something of these years.

Bilingual programs of early childhood care and education, in the years before school entry, should be a choice open to all Australian families. Mainstream early childhood education in a multicultural society, needs to be bilingual (or multilingual). Children from English speaking backgrounds are under-represented in bilingual programs. Opportunities are being wasted for non-English speaking background children attending bilingual programs to have peer models in English, and for English speaking background children to have peer models in languages other than English .

By starting the acquisition of a second language in bilingual programs in child care, children can build up two or three years of second language acquisition before school entry. This second language might be a LOTE or ESL, depending on the child's first language. Children in a bilingual child care or preschool centre are not simply having an extension of time in their years of second acquisition, they are also having a huge bonus of hours per week of language input. This would more than make up for any factor of less efficiency in second language acquisition of young language learners which some research suggests. Non English background children who have had two or three years of a quality bilingual program in child care, can be expected to enter primary school with ESL development at a functional level of communicative competence.

English speaking background children who have had two or three years of a bilingual program in child care might enter primary school having already had as many hours of second language acquisition as others, beginning

second language learning only after they start school, might have had at the end of primary school.

We need to care and educate young children within a bilingual language environment where the diversity of language is a fact that permeates all aspects of the program. A traditional child-centred, developmentally-matched program of early childhood education, rich in opportunities for play and for communicative interaction between children and between adults and children, can offer a superb first and second language learning environment if it is a bilingual program.

It should no longer be a choice whether early childhood educators have a substantial body of knowledge and skills related to first and second language acquisition in the years between birth and school entry. It is now a necessity. Institutions preparing early childhood educators can no longer pay lip service to second language acquisition through offering just a few sessions embedded in other courses, or through offering it merely as an elective study. This is not acceptable in Australia today, where language diversity is the reality, and the policy is that all Australian children will be competent in English and at least one other language.

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Table I

Home language of non-English Speaking Background Children in Preschools in Victoria,1991